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The use of films on history education in primary schools: Problems and suggestions

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Abstract

The use of films has a very important place among the alternative teaching tools, which can be used for achieving effective learning by helping to gather students' interest for the learning material. For the effective use of films on history education as an additional tool and avoiding possible harmful effects on students by the misuse, primarily the teachers should be educated for efficiency on the use of films as an educational tool. In this frame, teachers should be able to both reinforce learning and enhance critical thinking skills of their students by additional learning activities carried out before and after the film use.

Keywords: Primary education; history education; film use in education

1. Introduction

In the modern society, history education should include not only informing but also providing people by means to think out important issues (O'Connor, 1988, s.1209). When history education is carried out by the traditional instructional techniques, especially the primary school children perceive those courses' content as boring events occurred in the past and they pay reduced attention to the content. In order to eliminate this problem, using films can be counted as an important instructional tool in directing the students' attention to the learning material. The structure of History as a social science, fundamentally composed of formulating reliable and valid interpretations. Therefore, history education should be focused on providing students with skills, which could help them to analyze and interpret the historical issues. The main objective of history education should be providing students with critical thinking skills rather than solely leading students to memorize historical events (Vella, 2001, çev.).

Today, schools and formal education cannot be separated from the cultural environment, which is mainly affected by the technological developments in the information era. Therefore, in this era, films are acknowledged as effective history educators (Weinstein, 2001). As reported by Russell (2010), on the average, a adolescent spends over three hours a day watching television and videos. In this respect, teachers behaving strategically have begun to use films as an instructional tool for history education in the 21st century. When films are used as an instructional tool in history education, students can have a chance to see the theories and concepts in action. That is, they comprehend the historical events and concepts from a vivid perspective, as if they leap from the screen (Champoux, 1999).

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The use of films on history lessons

Although use of films as an educational enhancement tool is not a new idea, until recently the applicability of this idea has not been tested in practice. By the technological advancements in the visual media in the 20th century, research reporting use of films as educational tool have emerged since 1990s. As for Turkey, similar advancements have been observed (Demircioğlu, 2007; Öztaş, 2008).

Advantages and Disadvantages of Films in History Education

Films, depending on their nature, provide a wider perspective for comparison in many ways. Scenes from films made in different countries offer comparative views of different cultures. Besides, when the same film is remade, it can offer a chance to observe the same culture at different times. However, it should be kept in mind that films are fictional products, then the writers and directors have a control over the reality the films (Champoux, 1999).

In history education, documentaries and historical films are typically treated as factual statements. Additionally, the students are not usually encouraged to think on the underneath messages of the scenes presented. Because popular films are cultural products, they give students a chance to make connections to the historical era the movie takes place. The use of film as a primary source can provide students with opportunities to develop their own ideas rather than memorize facts. When they watch films, students apply their higher-level thinking skills on discovering the ideas behind the historical facts. In history education, the teacher should explain the students, watching a popular movie on a classroom hour is similar to read a book on the historical subject matter of the lesson. When use of films as instructional tools compared to the traditional approach, it is possible that more active and meaningful learning will result depending on the reason that students think, construct, or solve, rather than memorize information. However, when teachers use films merely to communicate some historical information or fact, rather than encourage student to think over the material critically, accomplish no more than teachers who rely solely on textbooks and lectures. Therefore, history teachers must set active, higher-level goals for their students in every educational endeavor, including the use of films in the classroom (Walker, 2006).

Points that need attention when films are used in history education

In Today's society, students need teachers' help to learn critical thinking skills to analyze the media, from music, videos and web environments to product placements in movies. When students obtain these critical skills, they will be able to make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good in future (Tesar-Doppen, 2006, s.261). By use of films as an instructional tool teachers have a chance to develop historical understanding on the students' part, however, this enhancement on students' understanding rely on teachers' efficiency to cultivate the skill to interpret film critically. This skill is called historical film literacy. Without historical film literacy skills, students may think that the scenes, images and dialogues they witness during the film are historical facts. For instance, without proper literacy skills it might be difficult for the students to separate the reality from the plot of the film (Marcus, 2005, s.62).

For the educational purposes, films should be used as a tool that provide students with a historical inquire skill, by which they question, evaluate, and compare different interpretations of historical events. By historical inquire approach, students construct their own historical knowledge which is based on inferences, speculations, and conclusions reached from evidence, not solely from any authoritative source such as the teacher, the textbook, or the information and images they see in a film. Besides, by a critical interpretative skill of history, students have opportunity to comprehend how historians, filmmakers, publishers, and authors construct the common understanding of the past. By use of films as educational tool, students can develop and practice (Woelders, 2007):

- genuine application of historical knowledge
- evaluative and analytical thinking

- critical ability necessary to interpret a range of different kinds of media
- persuasive communication skills using a variety of presentation formats.

The teacher should tell the students what to hunt for in the film. During the movie, teachers should stop at the essential points and discuss them in relation to the academic learning objectives of the course. Stop the film at critical points and get feedback from them. Teachers do not have to use the film as a whole, instead they should use it as an alternative source that serve for the educational objectives (Formwalt, 2002).

Discussion and Suggestions

In the modern era, it is easy to access historical information by any means of media for every individual. However, it is very important to provide students with the knowledge and skill to contemplate historical content critically (Stoddard-Marcus, 2010, s.89). For the effective use of films on history education as an additional tool and avoiding possible harmful effects on students by the misuse, primarily the teachers should be educated for efficiency on the use of films as an educational tool. In this frame, teachers should be able to both reinforce learning and enhance critical thinking skills of their students by additional learning activities carried out before and after the film use. In this respect, teachers should encourage the students to collect information on the subject matter before the film use, and that information should be discussed in the classroom. During the film use phase, scenes from various movies, which handle the same historical subject from different point of views, should be used if it is possible. In the case of accessing only one film on the subject, then teachers should supply additional resources for the students that have differential approaches and after the film is presented, students should be encouraged on comparing and contrasting the views critically. Then, it can be expected that the students will have the skill to learn effectively and review the historical movies critically they watch in their daily lives. That is, although the number of historical facts one can memorize is limited, this rule works differently for the skills. When a skill is gained, it can be applied for various occasions in future (Vella, 2001).

The use of films as an educational tool is not only limited to history courses. Thus, history teachers can collaborate with other teachers from different subject areas (Turkish education, science education, math education etc.) and they may choose films that comprise common issues, then this collaboration happens interdisciplinary. Besides, in accordance with this approach, students can be encouraged to conduct interdisciplinary projects. Therefore, it could be possible for students comprehend the relations between different subject areas in a holistic manner just as the life itself.

Although educators have various views on the use of films on history education, it is an obvious reality that recently children and adolescents gain their history knowledge mainly from the popular movies (Marcus, 2006). Thus, because the use of films in history education is a more complicated issue than only presenting film, history teachers should attend an comprehensive and practical education program in order to help students to gain a critical perspective that they can apply every areas of life.

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